

## **Soldier James Henry Gooding Protests Unequal Pay for Black Soldiers, 1863**

Morris Island, S.C.  
September 28, 1863

Your Excellency, Abraham Lincoln:

(1) Your Excellency will pardon the presumption of an humble individual like myself, in addressing you, but the earnest solicitation of my comrades in arms besides the genuine interest felt by myself in the matter is my excuse, for placing before the Executive head of the Nation our Common Grievance.

(2) On the 6th of the last Month, the Paymaster of the Department informed us, that if we would decide to receive the sum of \$10 (ten dollars) per month, he would come and pay us that sum, but that, on the sitting of Congress, the Regt. [regiment] would, in his opinion, be allowed the other 3 (three). He did not give us any guarantee that this would be, as he hoped; certainly he had no authority for making any such guarantee, and we cannot suppose him acting in any way interested.

(3) Now the main question is, are we Soldiers, or are we Laborers? We are fully armed, and equipped, have done all the various duties pertaining to a Soldier's life, have conducted ourselves to the complete satisfaction of General Officers, who were, if anything, prejudiced against us, but who now accord us all the encouragement and honors due us; have shared the perils and labor of reducing the first stronghold that flaunted a Traitor Flag; and more, Mr. President, today the Anglo Saxon Mother, Wife, or Sister are not alone in tears for departed Sons, Husbands, and Brothers. The patient, trusting descendant of Africa's Clime have dyed the ground with blood, in defence of the Union, and Democracy. Men, too, your Excellency, who know in a measure the cruelties of the iron heel of oppression, which in years gone by, the very power their blood is now being spilled to maintain, ever ground them in the dust.

(4) But when the war trumpet sounded o'er the land, when men knew not the Friend from the Traitor, the black man laid his life at the altar of the Nation,—and he was refused. When the arms of the Union were beaten, in the first year of the war, and the Executive called for more food for its ravenous maw, again the black man begged the privilege of aiding his country in her need, to be again refused.

(5) And now he is in the War, and how has he conducted himself? Let their dusky forms rise up, out of the mires of James Island, and give the answer. Let the rich mould around Wagner's

parapet be upturned, and there will be found an eloquent answer. Obedient and patient and solid as a wall are they. All we lack is a paler hue and a better acquaintance with the alphabet.

(6) Now your Excellency, we have done a Soldier's duty. Why can't we have a Soldier's pay? You caution the Rebel chieftain, that the United States knows no distinction in her soldiers. She insists on having all her soldiers of whatever creed or color, to be treated according to the usages of War. Now if the United States exacts uniformity of treatment of her soldiers from the insurgents, would it not be well and consistent to set the example herself by paying all her soldiers alike?

(7) We of this Regt. were not enlisted under any "contraband" act. But we do not wish to be understood as rating our service of more value to the Government than the service of the ex-slave. Their service is undoubtedly worth much to the Nation, but Congress made express provision touching their case, as slaves freed by military necessity, and assuming the Government to be their temporary Guardian. Not so with us. Freemen by birth and consequently having the advantage of thinking and acting for ourselves so far as the Laws would allow us, we do not consider ourselves fit subjects for the Contraband act.

(8) We appeal to you, Sir, as the Executive of the Nation, to have us justly dealt with. The Regt. do pray that they be assured their service will be fairly appreciated by paying them as American Soldiers, not as menial hirelings. Black men, you may well know, are poor; three dollars per month, for a year, will supply their needy wives and little ones with fuel. If you, as Chief Magistrate of the Nation, will assure us of our whole pay, we are content. Our Patriotism, our enthusiasm will have a new impetus, to exert our energy more and more to aid our Country. Not that our hearts ever flagged in devotion, spite the evident apathy displayed in our behalf, but we feel as though our country spurned us, now we are sworn to serve her. Please give this a moment's attention.

Source: Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York: Citadel Press, 1951), 482–484.

### **A Black Union Soldier Demands Equal Pay**

June, 1864 to 1864

RICHMOND, Virginia

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In a recommendation for trial written by a First Lieutenant of the 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S Colored Cavalry in early June of 1864 there is mention of Private Sylvester Ray, also of the 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S Colored Cavalry, who demanded equal pay for the African-American soldiers. In this recommendation, he states that, "he charges conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline." At this time, black soldiers made seven dollars a month plus a three dollar clothing allowance while white soldiers of the same rank made thirteen dollars a month.

In many units, black soldiers were not permitted the same benefits as their white counterparts. It did not take long for the black soldiers to become aware of these discrepancies and start to demand equal pay. Private Sylvester Ray wanted pay that was the same as white soldiers because seven dollars a month was not enough to send home or pay for things that the black soldiers needed. Additionally, this discrepancy in pay was an injustice to African-American soldiers who were fighting for the same cause as their white counterparts. According to historian Christian Samito, "the pay disparity undermined army discipline but also energized black soldiers' demands for equal treatment." When black soldiers realized that they were not being paid equally they threatened to desert the army or to rise against their white superior officers. Other places, the black soldiers rejected their pay, demanding equal pay. The tipping point for many of the soldiers was letters that had been sent from home. In many of these letters, their parents, wives, or children did not have enough money to survive on and were suffering. After receiving his letter, one unnamed soldier said, "we have been tried in the fire both of affliction and of the rebels, and nothing remains but pure metal." This sentiment was reflected across most black units until equal pay was promised in late June, just a short while after Private Ray's recommendation for trial. After enough troops protested the unfair conditions, the military started to listen. Samito believes that change occurred as "white officers came to realize, black soldiers mutinied not out of nervous energy...but as political action undertaken by men who felt newly entitled by their wearing of the uniform.

Private Sylvester Ray's subsequent muster roll was also listed with his recommendation for trial. In the muster roll, it is clear that his pay for the month was raised to be equal with what was normal for white soldiers. It appears that his insistence on fairness and justice paid.

#### **Citations**

- Christian G. Samito, "The Intersection Between Military Justice and Equal Rights: Mutinies, Courts-martial, and Black Civil War Soldiers," *Civil War History* 2 (June 2007): 170-202.
- Susan-Mary Grant, "Pride and Prejudice in the American Civil War," *History Today* 9 (September 1998): 1-13.
- *Recommendation for Trial of Private Sylvester Ray*, National Archive-Civil War & Reconstruction, June, 1864 (N/A, N/A), <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war/equal-pay.html>.

**Source:** Episodes from "Civil War and Reconstruction," Juniata College (Fall 2013)

<http://historyengine.richmond.edu/episodes/view/5815>

Pay Voucher

*R* | *2 Cav.* | **U.S.C.T.**  
*Sylvester Roy*  
*Privt, Co. B, 2 Reg't U.S. Col'd Cavalry*  
Appears on a  
**Detachment Muster Roll**  
of the organization named above  
for *Sept & Oct*, 186*4*.  
Station *In the field, Va*  
Present or absent *Present*  
Stoppage, \$.....100 for.....  
Due Gov't, \$.....100 for.....  
Valuation of horse, \$.....100  
Valuation of horse equipments, \$.....100  
Remarks: *Difference be-*  
*tween white and*  
*colored soldiers*  
*pay due from*  
*Dec 22/63 to Feb*  
*29/64*  
Book mark: *2*  
*W. S. Roy*  
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*R*      *2 Cav.*      **U.S.C.T.**

*Sylvester Ray*  
(unclear), Co. B, 2 Reg't U.S. Col'd Cavalry

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